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AUTHOR	Gnassi, Bruno
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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the current status and future of Canada's Depository Service Program (DSP) for government information. The first section discusses the depository model, including changes due to information technology and decentralization of government authority. Access and preservation are addressed in the second section, including the implications of the migration to electronic format. The third section describes Service Canada, an initiative of the Canadian federal government mandated to: create a strong horizontal management structure; foster coordination, partnerships, and alliances among federal departments and agencies; and champion citizen-centered integrated service delivery. The next section considers traditional media, focusing on the continued popularity of print materials and the role of Canadian Government Publishing, the federal government's official publisher. In the fifth section, changes in the DSP's role and vision are summarized, and several recent initiatives are described. The final section discusses Canadian Depository Services in the new millennium. (Contains 28 footnotes.) (MES)

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1

Accessing Canadian Federal Information: a Depository Program for the Twenty-First Century?

Bruno Gnassi
Depository Services Program
350 Albert Street
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0S5
Canada
Bruno.Gnassi@pwgsc.gc.ca

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Paper

Introduction

Robert Hewison once remarked that the turn of a century raises expectations, but that the end of a millennium promises apocalypse as well as revelation. (1) It seems appropriate six months not only from the end of the decade and the century, but the millennium, that we look both backward to the past and forward to the future.

Two years into the new millennium, Canada's Depository Services Program (DSP) will celebrate its 75th anniversary. Three quarters of century of service and existence is no small feat. The life cycles of government programs are generally measured in days and years rather than decades and centuries.

The Depository Services Program (DSP) is probably one of the Canadian government's oldest programs. It makes some sense then to stop, and take stock of where it stands now that it is on the verge of the millennium.

The last two decades have dramatically altered the environment in which the Depository Services Program operates. The old familiar and comfortable paradigms on which it was based have disappeared. In their place, the DSP confronts both conceptual challenges and opportunities.

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The fact of the matter may be that the time has come to consider whether Canada's Depository Services Program is moving into the autumn of its existence. This question needs to be faced not only because others are asking it, but also because its time has come. (2) The inescapable reality for the DSP is that the changing face of Government information and service delivery may well be issuing a final curtain call. Government funding remains scarce. Faced with conflicting demands, government may well feel that the DSP is no longer required, especially now that we are swiftly moving towards the first true full electronic era. What I propose to do in this paper is to examine the Program's position at the close of the decade and to reflect on its future. Should there, will there, be a DSP six months from today as we turn the page on the decade?

The Depository Model - the challenge of change: a new paradigm

The last twenty years have recast many, if not all, of the assumptions that have shaped the familiar world of government publishing. Information technology, the decentralisation of government authority, and the separation of government's information generation activities from the centralised procurement of information services have altered forever the environment in which Canada's Depository Services Program operates.

The Canadian federal Depository Program faces a publishing landscape that is far removed from the assumptions that founded it in 1927 when the depository model could count on the weight of the Crown's common printing service to ensure that it had access to the products needed to meet its mandate. Even in 1991, when the Treasury Board of Canada repatriated to federal departments and agencies responsibility for providing the DSP with priced information products, no one could have guessed at the siren call the Internet would exercise on departmental autonomy, publishing patterns, and operational visions. The almost total devolution of the production, printing and warehousing of government information to private sector interests, and federal departments, may have been prefigured, but it was still a full seven years away.

The big issues for the Depository Services Program during this period were the growing impact of data bases and cd-rom on depository access, the failure of certain departments to respond to depository requirements, the need to ensure its operational efficiency and to reconcile its requirements with the commercial ones of its host. (3) Today, devolution is a fait accompli. The Canada Communication Group, the official printer of the Canadian government, no longer exists. The Internet, the WEB, and electronic information are fundamental components of the federal government's information dissemination strategy, and government information has moved far beyond the limits of a single producer or player. (4)

Access and Preservation - the key

The challenge of ensuring equitable access is no longer simply a question of positioning resources geographically and using the distribution principles of the depository model to achieve this. It is not uncommon now with the presence of entrenched community access points through federal initiatives such as Industry Canada's Community Access and Schoolnet programs to find libraries and users exploiting Canadian government information resources to which they would have had little or no access in the past. (5) By the end of decade virtually all of Canada's public libraries and schools will be linked to the Internet. Some thirty percent of Canadians are currently Internet enabled either through their work place, their home, or through library intermediaries, and the number is growing. Just recently, International Data Corp. (Canada), a Toronto based computer consulting firm, reported that its surveys suggest that fifty (50%) of Canadian households now have at least one person with Internet access this way. (6)

Information technology has both enhanced and complicated our ability to reach out and

connect with government information. The joint Depository Services Program and Statistics Canada Electronic Publications Pilot study amply demonstrates that hardware, training, human resource issues, capacity, and even the suitability of the choice of electronic medium, continue to make reliance on government electronic information an interesting challenge for Canadian depositories and users alike. (7)

As more and more Canadian federal information migrates to electronic format only, it is critical that Canada's federal departments and agencies appreciate and understand the implications of this for Canadian libraries and users. The Dolan and Vaughan study of the state of readiness of Canadian depository libraries to use electronic information, and the DSP/Statistics Canada own joint Electronic Publications Pilot study, forcefully document the enthusiasm with which Canadian depositories generally support digital resources. However, they also confirm the need for Canadian federal departments and agencies to realise that electronic resources still compliment rather than replace traditional formats, and that electronic resources bring with them format limitations, demands for additional support, and concerns about their availability in the future that must not be ignored.(8)

Easily tracing, finding, and gaining access to electronic resources is no less important than bandwidth and the accessibility of computers in this equation. (9) Guaranteeing longevity is even more fundamental.

By its very nature the Internet is transient and transparent. Web sites evolve and change. They come and go. Content is up dated and discarded, and context is lost. Researchers who traditionally have relied on this information to build on previous knowledge increasingly find that it is not there. Inadequate indexing, the volume of information on the Internet, and the inefficiency of search engines compounds the problem and often makes it a challenge to locate the documents needed. (10) As the authors of the Electronic Publications Pilot report point out: "One hundred year old print products are accessible and readable, but will that be true for electronic publications in future?" (11)

Canada's federal departments and agencies clearly bear some responsibility for ensuring the preservation and archiving of their information. Canada's National Archives and National Library Acts as well as the Canadian federal government's own internal information management policies ensure this. Yet, to rely solely on the departments and agencies to achieve preservation of our digital documentation ignores that they are "about operations, about getting the word out to the populace and about interactions that occur as agencies form rules and do work". (12) Concerns about such things as preservation do rarely enter into this equation. Like many, Canadian federal departments and agencies look primarily to others to carry this burden.

As crucial as government information may be to success within the market place, in this environment, it tends to be discarded as soon as it is up dated or its immediate purpose is satisfied. Ultimately, only historians, economists, scholars, researchers and librarians have an interest in permanence. However, it is just as clear, that libraries can not be expected to carry the burden of preservation alone. (13)

Decisions about the permanence and accessibility of content must now be made before material is removed from a server. In addition, decisions about the value of preserving the artifact as well as its content must be tackled. Data redundancy to ensure against loss and the fair distribution of this role must also be considered. (14) A single institution may well be technically in a position to take on the full archiving and preservation role but is this practical, wise, or affordable? A partnership of both government institutions and the library community will likely be needed to resolve these questions effectively.

Other factors shaping the agenda - the Service Canada initiative

Government departments and agencies may originally have conceived of information

technology as a way to reduce costs only, but they are now looking beyond what Clifford Lynch labels "indulging in static publishing". Web pages, data bases and dynamic material do not easily or readily give themselves over to a framework some would qualify as paper based. (15) In Canada, the all to familiar refrain that "government should digitise all its paper, put it on the Internet, and so push off the cost of access and remote printing directly to intermediaries and end users" is gradually giving way to a new vision. Canadian federal departments and agencies now see information technology increasingly as a way to engage the citizen directly in a two-way discourse. (16)

Recent Canadian government studies indicate that Canadians have a much more ambiguous and remote relationship to their federal government than in the past. They are unhappy with the lack of coherence and integration amongst Canadian government services and programs. They are also frustrated with the difficulty they have in making use of them. 'Connecting with Canadians' has become a major preoccupation of Canada's federal government as it struggles to find a cost-effective way to address these complaints. (17)

Information technology, and the services it supports, is the new cement and mortar that the Canadian government hopes will make it possible for it to be present, visible and immediate to its citizens. It is conceived as the backbone that will link departments and agencies seamlessly to provide timely, accurate, single window service and information. To achieve this, the Canadian federal government recently launched Service Canada with a mandate to create " a strong horizontal management structure". It is also to foster coordination, partnerships and alliances amongst federal departments and agencies, and to champion citizen centred integrated service delivery. (18) For example, it is set to launch a number of pilots with Canadian federal departments such as Human Resources Development Canada and the Canada Post Office which will establish a network of walk-in centres in rural, remote, and select urban communities across Canada. These centres will offer both self-service and personal assistance, and will rely on the Internet to enable citizens to access government programs, services and transactions in an integrated fashion. Each centre will also be tailored to local needs. (19) When fully implemented, the Service Canada network will have some 700 sites.

Canada's Department of Public Works and Government Services' Canada Site and the Government of Canada Enquiry Service (Reference Canada) are targeted to provide the infrastructure that will support the Service Canada network. Both the Canada Site and Reference Canada are currently being upgraded to offer a broader range of information and to handle some basic transactions as well as to provide referrals.

The Canada site is being redesigned to facilitate its role. It will carry expanded content, links and interactivity. Search and navigation have already been improved with the introduction of a new search engine. Functions such as electronic commerce and on-line forms will be added in the near future. In addition, the Canada site will acquire new capabilities to assist automated information management across the Canadian federal government. (20) Reference Canada, the Canadian federal government's premier telephone referral service, is also being strengthened. Its data base of Programs and services is being enhanced and will be made Internet accessible. Federal departments and agencies will be encouraged to use its new toll free "1-800-0 CANADA service" as the public's telephone gateway into the federal government. In addition, more staff, greater visibility, and greater priority will be accorded to it. Services that resonate well with these models and approaches will likely do well.

Traditional media - still part of the equation

Although there has been a steady increase in the amount of Canadian government information made available through the Internet, hard copy remains a popular medium that can not be overlooked. Where multiple formats exist, depository libraries confirm that many users continue to express a marked preference for it. (21)

The ongoing migration of Canadian government information to the Internet has not resulted in

a significant reduction in traditional media. Whether or not publications are freely accessible on the Internet has made no difference to the number of copies requested from Canada's Depository Services Program. The DSP still distributes annually close to two (2) million copies even though major contributors of product such as the Canadian House of Commons have virtually eliminated this format from their publishing programs.

Print on demand is very much in evidence in the Canadian federal departmental publishing. Paper has become a value added offering capable of attracting premium prices. Canadian Government Publishing (CGP), the Canadian federal government's official publisher, estimates that it alone now has an inventory of some 7,000 titles that it makes available only in print on demand. There is no way to guess at the number of titles that federal departments and agencies have opted to make available through similar arrangements directly with other suppliers and printers.

The licensing of unpublished government information for conversion to cd-rom is also growing. The Crown copyright and licensing service of CGP estimates that it has witnessed close to a two hundred percent increase in the volume of co-publishing and licensing transactions it has overseen in the last four years. There have been similar, if somewhat more modest increases, in licensing and co-publishing initiatives for print formats as well. (22) Canadian Government Publishing is proposing a revised publication development model that will see much more material produced under license or through co-publishing arrangements.

Subsequent to the privatisation of the Canada Communication Group in 1997, the Treasury Board of Canada and the Department of Public Works and Government Services (PWGSC) undertook a functional review of the way the federal government as a whole approached communications issues that cut across the government. The Communications Coordination Services Branch (CCSB) of PWGSC emerged from these consultations, and was assigned the task of helping to coordinate communications issues for the Government of Canada, and to facilitate public access to Government of Canada information. Four new sectors were established to achieve this.

CCSB's Strategic Communications provides liaison with the central policy agents of the Canadian government such as the Privy Council Office, the Canada Information Office, and the Treasury Board of Canada. Its Client Services and Industry relations provide advice, strategic support, and project management related to government wide advertising, media communications, and public opinion research. CCSB's Procurement services facilitates the acquisition of communication services and products such as printing, audio-visual, multi-media, and public relations from the private sector, while its Branch Management provides the administrative and operational assistance required. The CCSB's Public Access Programs Sector facilitates public access to government information. (23) It regrouped the Canada Gazette, Canadian Government Publishing, the Depository Services Program, Reference Canada, and the Canada Site. As a result, there has been a major re-think of the role the Canadian federal government's official publisher, Canadian Government Publishing will play within the Canadian government's publishing strategy.

In future, CGP's primary role will not be to publish federal government information but to facilitate its creation and dissemination. It will no longer assume responsibility for product development, or recover sales revenues. These will revert to the author departments and their publishers. Instead, Canadian Government Publishing will concentrate on providing Canadian federal departments and agencies with the support and expertise they need to develop their products themselves. It will identify the most appropriate media for them, will assist departments and agencies to determine the commercial potential of their information and to gain access to the private sector publishers and producers who can assist them create and disseminate the information.

CGP is currently in the early phases of realigning its direction. It has approached both Public Works and Government Services and the Treasury Board of Canada to secure funding

necessary to eliminate its dependence on the sale of publications to cover its operating costs. It is also asking for the necessary policy adjustments to implement the new model and change its mandate.

The Depository Services Program - a changeling in sheep's clothing

Canada's Depository Services Program has not remained impassive in the face of the changes occurring around it. It is perhaps too frequently overlooked that the DSP was amongst the earliest elements within the Canadian federal government to exploit the potential of the Internet. (24) Since 1991, the Depository Service has unobtrusively but steadily adjusted its role and vision. It recognised early on that the changes in Canada's federal publishing would establish new boundaries and opportunities even if it did not always appreciate the extent of these. At the same time, it continues to remain sensitive to its traditional mandate.

In the last several years, the Depository Services Program has placed increasing emphasis on two roles: providing to Canada's depositories an integrated locator service for government information, and providing support to the depository community. It is in this context that the DSP inaugurated the now annual practice of sponsoring workshops to sensitise federal departments and agencies to the position depositories can occupy in making digital resources accessible.(25) It is the basis on which it launched Infodep, its listserv. It is the basis too on which it partnered with the Canadian document community the publication of Canadian Government Information on the Internet (CGII), a comprehensive net based bibliographic resource to Canadian federal, provincial, and municipal government web sites, that is accessible through the DSP's Web site. It is also the rationale which made possible the fully searchable Web accessible version of Info Source, the Canadian government's guide to unpublished Canadian federal information resources, now available because of its extensive collaboration with the Treasury Board of Canada's Info Source team. Canada's Depository Services Program is proposing to continue this with the integration of its Canadian federal government data bases product into the CGII package.

Canada's DSP is committed to upgrading and improving its WEB site. It is launching a complete review of the site and will make it fully compatible with the Canadian government's new directives on "common look and feel". These directives are intended to make Canadian federal WEB sites easier to identify and more consistent amongst each other, and to ensure that they adhere to the World Wide WEB Consortiums (W3C) priority 1 and 2 accessibility guidelines.(26) In addition, the Program is undertaking to replace its production data base so that it is in a better position to develop Internet based resources for finding federal information while continuing to support its traditional print products. This effort includes replacing its current WAIS based search engine.

Just recently, the Depository Services initiated a review and upgrade of its thesaurus. It will be integrating into the thesaurus the 10,000 indexing terms used by the Government of Canada's telephone inquiry service to provide access to information on federal programs and services. Depending on the outcome of its efforts to replace its production data base, and cost, the DSP intends to incorporate the new thesaurus directly into the search functionality of its renewed WEB site. It hopes, as well, to pilot the addition of abstracts to more of its bibliographic products, and to keep expanding the number of Internet resources that it identifies. The DSP will continue to extend as needed its protected site for priced Canadian federal Internet titles, and will negotiate arrangements with suppliers as quickly as it feasible.

The Program has tabled proposals with both the Treasury Board of Canada and Public Works and Government Services to broaden the products that it makes available to the depository community. This includes addressing the contentious issue of core materials in print-on-demand, cartographic, or other formats that remain unavailable to the depository network unless purchased directly from suppliers. Finally, it is exploring alternative models for supporting access to federal electronic information.

On April 15th 1999, Canada's DSP launched the SIGI/SIIG (System of Interactive Government Information / Système interactif d'information gouvernementale) Initiative. SIGI/SIIG will explore and test models and tools for ensuring permanent access to collections of digitized federal information using Canada's depository library network. It is the result of restructuring proposals approved by the Program's Library Advisory Committee, which recommended that the DSP establish an infrastructure within Canada's depository community to support permanent access to both free and priced federal government information in digitized form. (27)

The initiative brings together, in a cooperative pilot, both major Canadian academic institutions and a number of Canadian federal departments and agencies involved in Canada's Depository Program. The depositories involved include the libraries of Dalhousie University, the University of New Brunswick, McGill University, the University of Western Ontario, and the University of Alberta. In addition to the Library Advisory Committee of the DSP, there is Canadian Government Publishing, the National Library of Canada, the Canadian House of Commons, and elements of the Treasury Board of Canada.

SIGI/SIIG hopes to address experimentally depository concerns about the permanence and archiving of Canadian federal government information. It intends to develop a model gateway to support access to digital holdings and resources of federal information held by Canadian depository institutions. It also intends to establish model procedures, structures and policies to make digitized federal information resources accessible to, and available through, depositories via the DSP. Lastly, SIGI/SIIG hopes to implement model training activities and programs to facilitate and promote the more effective use of digitized federal information resources in depository institutions.

A Canadian Depository Services in the new millennium?

Canada's Depository Services Program is frequently referred to as the "public's information safety net". The need to archive and preserve electronic government information as well as the continuing need to make hard copy government information accessible in an equitable fashion suggests that there is still a place for the DSP and the depository network in the new millennium. Access, archiving and preservation are elements that are just beginning to come into their own. The solutions required to make electronic government information easier to find, retrieve and preserve are only starting to become issues within the Canadian federal government. The Depository Program and its network have a wealth of experience to draw upon to continue to play a role in addressing these concerns. To exercise this role, the DSP and its partners will need to rethink the emphasis we place on various elements of the depository model and to forge new partnerships within government. The Service Canada initiative, for example, offers new scope for assisting Canada's government to reach out to its citizens. Indexing, abstracting and reference expertise, facilitating access, and creating partnerships for the preservation of electronic information are all features of the depository model that would serve both it and the Canadian government well.

Ultimately, the issue at stake is not the number of distribution points or the method of distribution. It is whether Canada's Depository Services Program and depository programs in general, can succeed in making government recognise that the depository partnership is an opportunity rather than a costly liability. Depositories have expertise and capabilities that remain valid and valuable regardless of the nature of the information. Yet, this value-added frequently does not register with funding authorities.

Libraries are understood to be important channels to the Internet, and invaluable allies in extending the reach of this technology into the community. However, it is not as clear that government fully appreciates the extent to which depository institutions can be valuable partners in servicing the citizen's requirements for government information. Even though Canada's Depository Services Program is required to act as the Canadian public's informal route to access federal government information, its future is far from assured. It is not enough

that the Canadian Depository Services Program and its network achieve their mandate well. It is just as essential that the Program's effectiveness and contributions to public access be highly visible to those in authority.

The Canadian federal DSP readily reinforces the purpose section of Canada's Access to Information Act in that it clearly enhances the means by which government information is "normally available to the general public". It is not inconceivable that the availability of government information through the Depository Services Program's network could be used as the litmus test in Canada for what constitutes "published" information under the Act. Such a legislative basis would go a long way towards assisting the Program acquire the profile needed to attract interest.

The Canadian Depository Services Program will continue to face interesting times as it moves closer to the new millennium. The next few months will prove crucial. As the Canadian government attempts once more to deal with conflicting demands on its limited funding, Canada's Depository Services Program will inevitably come again under detailed scrutiny. The Canadian government will have to make up its mind as to what, if any, the DSP's strategic role within the Canadian government's communications practice should be. The report of its own Federal Task Force on Digitisation unambiguously recommended that Canada's DSP should be strengthened by legislation and expanded.(28) It remains to be seen whether this will come to pass, and whether there will still be a Canadian Depository Services Program to celebrate a 75th anniversary in the year 2002.

Footnotes

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